

When students don't meet the bar

Help students meet Common Core standards through careful and extensive lesson planning that uses exemplars and anticipates trouble spots.



In Amy Tan's short story "Fish Cheeks," a 14-year-old Chinese-American narrator falls in love with a Caucasian boy from her church. She's mortified when she learns her parents have invited his family to join them for their Christmas Eve dinner. "What would Robert think of our shabby Chinese Christmas," she wonders. "What terrible disappointment would he feel upon seeing not a roasted turkey and sweet potatoes but Chinese food?" Her fears intensify as the event draws nearer, especially when she catches a glimpse of the kitchen:

On Christmas Eve, I saw that my mother had outdone herself in creating a strange menu. She was pulling black veins out of the backs of fleshy prawns. The kitchen was littered with appalling mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod with bulging eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges. A bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they resembled bicycle tires.

Amy Rowe, a 6th-grade teacher planning a series of lessons on "Fish Cheeks," circles this paragraph with a blue ballpoint pen. Her students are working to mas-

ter the Common Core English language arts standard 6.4:

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

Rowe plans to use this passage to increase her students' ability to analyze figurative language, asking them directly: "How does Tan use figurative language to convey the narrator's tone?"

Her next question, though, is for herself — and it is deceptively simple: What does she want her students to write when she delivers this prompt?

Standard 6.4 tells her that her students need to analyze the impact of specific figurative language, but it doesn't tell her how she'll know when they've done it.

After some deliberation, Rowe develops this exemplar response for her 6th graders:

In this passage from "Fish Cheeks," the narrator uses figurative language to show that she is embarrassed about her family's Christmas dinner. For example, she compares the squid to bicycle tires. This comparison helps reveal the disgust she feels about the meal, since no one would ever want to eat bicycle tires, and they might even make us think of dirty streets or road kill. Making the squid sound so disgusting shows how the narrator is worried the boy she has a crush on won't like what her family eats.

This sample response may

not match exactly what another teacher would write as an exemplar for his or her students. And, to be sure, the precise responses that students generated could differ significantly from this sample without being considered incorrect. Still, Rowe now has a starting point that pins down what she wants in her students' answers: a conclusion about the narrator's tone, relevant evidence, and supporting sentences that link the evidence to the conclusion. That starting point will be extremely powerful a few days later when Rowe teaches her lesson. Let's flash forward to that lesson to see how.

Rowe has delivered her prompt to her students, and she circulates the classroom as they work on their written responses. As Rowe glances at her students' works-in-progress, she sees a consistent **pattern** of responses along these lines:

Tan dislikes what her mother is cooking. For example, she uses the phrase 'bicycle tires.' This reveals that the narrator's tone is disgusted.

Rowe recognizes a common error in her students' responses. Her students have easily recognized the negative connotation of the passage ("She dislikes what her mother is cooking") and have chosen appropriate text evidence (the bicycle tires). They are struggling, however, to explain their evidence and show why it proves their claim.

So, as she circulates, Rowe places a checkmark next to each piece of correct evidence and cir-

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cles evidence or explanations that require correction. She prompts one student, “Link your evidence to your argument.” The students, who are familiar with these symbols, have a few more minutes to revise and complete their responses before Rowe tells them time is up and checks their progress. “A lot of you mentioned that the narrator used words like ‘bi-cycle tires’ to describe her mother’s cooking,” she begins when all pencils are down. “Who can tell me why the author chose those words?” At the end of class, students will respond to another similar writing prompt. Rowe will see exactly what they’ve learned and what they still need to learn.

What makes this experience so powerful is not only how she is able to give students real-time feedback to remedy their error in a matter of minutes, but also how Rowe is able to target exactly what students need. If she had only used the standard 6.4 as her guide, Rowe might have been satisfied that her students could identify figurative language and recognize its general connotation. But her students still would have fallen short of what the Common Core — and great teachers — require: the ability to use text evidence to build an argument.

Rowe could not have provided this laser-like feedback if she hadn’t started by writing an exemplar response. It defined what her students truly needed to do in order to meet her objective for the lesson by showing just how it would look when they did it correctly. In the midst of the lesson, Rowe could see right away what her students still needed because she knew what she was looking for.

Core idea: At the heart of the great lesson lies not just an objective of what you want students to do, but an exemplar of what it will look like when they do it.

Let’s look more closely at how Rowe prepared her exemplar — and how she used it to fuel instruction.

Defining rigor

At its core, an exemplar takes our broad standards and transforms them into a concrete definition of how “rigor” looks. The most a standard can offer — even a great standard — is a vague description of “what” students must learn. An exemplar paves the way from “what” they’ll learn to “how” they’ll show it.

When crafting an exemplar, consider what’s most important for students to demonstrate in their responses in order to meet the standard you’re working toward. Rowe, for example, needed her students to be able to link their evidence to a central claim, so her exemplar shows precisely what that looks like. The result is a far more targeted lesson than if Rowe simply planned to have her students practice doing what the standard described.

Closing the gaps — quickly

The second crux of what made Rowe’s lesson so powerful was that she was able to close the gaps between what her exemplar had said and what her students actually did — and she gave nearly every student individualized coaching toward that goal in just 10 minutes. How can any teacher accomplish such deep instruction at such a high speed? Here are a few keys.

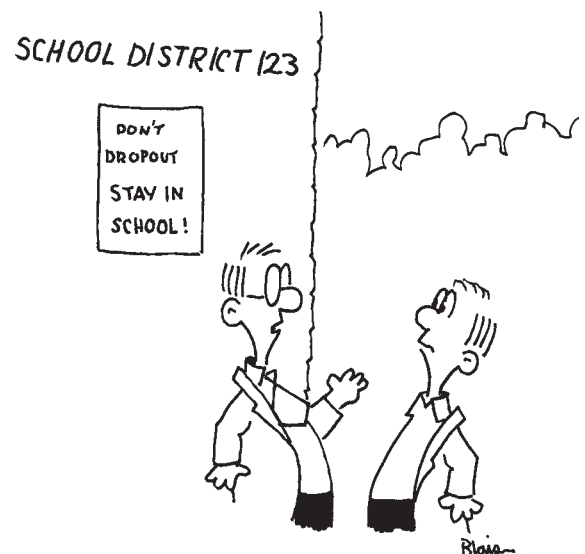
Collect your signposts. Your exemplar tells you the destination you want your students to reach. The responses the students actually generate point the way. When you use in-class data to inform your next move, you not only address error in the moment, but you also give yourself guidance on how to plan in the days and weeks to come. Why wait to grade student writing and plan whole new lessons accordingly when you can use data as it is produced — within the very same class hour?

Go to the fastest writers first. When teachers monitor student writing, they tend to go straight to their most struggling writers and spend the bulk of the time with them. This often means that

only a few students get feedback while they are writing. To get more useful feedback to more students, try heading first to the students who write the fastest — not necessarily your strongest writers, but the ones who will be sure to have something written down for you to coach them on when you reach their desks. You can give them feedback and still reach your strugglers when they’ll be ready to receive feedback.

Speak in code. The symbol system Rowe used to let her students know when they needed to break down their evidence further is a highly effective way to communicate quickly with more students rather than at greater length with only a few. When you use a single letter to say what might take three sentences to say otherwise, you can reach up to four times as many students in the same amount of time.

Developing an objective is only the beginning of envisioning how far your students can go. Writing an exemplar will bring it into unmistakable focus, so that there can be no doubt when your students have reached it. As we work to reach the rigor of Common Core and ask ourselves what “rigor” really means, scarcely anything could be more powerful. **K**



“It’s not about students. . . . We’re having a difficult time retaining teachers.”